

Mini Series: – Visiting a project of a Former Colleague

Part 2 – Safe and secure vegetable cultivation in Ushimado, the ‘Aegean Sea’ of Japan

As introduced in page 3, we visited a former colleague who is doing a good job in Ushimado, which is called Japan’s ‘Aegean Sea’, in Setouchi City, Okayama Prefecture. During our visit, we shared sweaty work in the hot sun on his farm that overlooks the Seto Inland Sea. In the evenings, we could listen to many stories from various local farming community members over drinks, with freshly harvested organic vegetables serving as drinking snacks. Many of the organic farmers here are those who started farming recently, including people who have returned from the city life to their home town and people who left their home city in search of a different lifestyle. Many of them had some kinds of training in vegetable or rice cultivation techniques before starting to farm full time. It was stressed that it was important to gain a certain amount of experience before starting to farm on a commercially viable basis. As long as the business only involves individuals and family members, it is difficult to make a living solely on the sale of organic produce. Given this fact, some farmers are looking into additional income sources. Organic farming requires a much larger amount of extra time and labor for weeding and pest control compared with conventional chemical reliant farming. Even if one hires workers, it may not necessarily be advantageous for the business, as outlets need to expand, too. There are members who are exploring ways of making organic farming easier and more cost effective by forming an organization. In addition, there were intensive discussions on possible mechanisms to develop programs for urban residents to enable them to experience farming, enjoy ecotourism, or to organize organic farming training programs, in order to secure necessary labor.

We heard that there was an organization that produces, processes and sells natural food products, and we visited their office and farm. The operation is a combination of various businesses. These include farm produce production, farm produce retail, restaurants, confectionery and bread making. The collaboration between the processing industry and restaurants is a highly effective way of adding value to farm produce. Their farm produce production section is the Wacca Farm, an agricultural corporation. The company does not only produce organic vegetables but is also active in social services, accepting volunteers through registration with the Willing Workers On Organic Farms Japan (WWOOF Japan)¹ and inviting handicapped people to work on the farm. The staff at the Wacca Farm seemed to have been very motivated for their work. The Wacca office and housing complex we visited was formally used as a company dormitory, and it is perfect as an accommodation facility for trainees and WWOOF Japan volunteers. It can also be used for various exchange meetings. The 3 hectare abandoned farm, which is leased from a farmer, is cultivated. The farm is located in a valley with bad drainage, and it seemed that there was still much room for innovation to improve cultivation techniques.

Furthermore, we had a chance to meet with Professor Yoshiro Kishida at the farm attached to the Faculty of Agriculture at Okayama University. Professor Kishida had been engaged with various practical works aiming to revitalize agriculture in the region. At the University farm, we observed experimental plots for improved ‘aigamo’ duck farming using domestic ducks, and for testing a nitrogen fixing water plant, “azolla” for farming. In addition to activities aimed at improving cultivation techniques, he is working to develop a distribution system that directly links producers with consumers. With a strong connection with enthusiastic farmers within Okayama Prefecture and areas outside Okayama with advanced organic farming establishments, and closely exchanging with organic farmers in Ushimado, he is promoting an active “*chisan chisho* (local production for local consumption)” movement.

In Ushimado, a number of organic farmers are active and are seriously concerned about food safety and security. There are also associations and coalitions that practice various activities that promote natural food, as well as researchers who provide strong back-up for these activities. Triggered by the recent cases of toxic food items imported from China, public interest in safe food is growing. And as the input costs in conventional farming increase, organic farming is attracting renewed attention. In these circumstances, we felt a pleasant breeze in Ushimado ushering in the establishment of a new production and support system based on key themes such as “food culture”, “food mileage” and “farm land conservation”.



¹ WWOOF JAPAN: Willing Workers On Organic Farms (<http://www.woofjapan.com>)